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## THE INTELLECTUAL CONTENT OF LITERATURE<sup>1</sup>

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It is superfluous, in such a gathering as this, to remark that a division of the subject under such headings as "technique," "emotional content," and "intellectual content" is only a formal division, adopted for reasons of convenience. I need not remind you that form, emotion, idea, are no more separable elements in any literary or artistic production than memory, imagination, and will are in the human personality; and that, if we separate them for purposes of discussion, it is with a clear recognition of their interpenetration and indissolubility in actual experience. But, to take an example from another field, in viewing a stretch of country one may dwell on the features of geological significance—river-valleys and terraces and lake-basins—or again on its adaptability to human settlement and industry, or, if one choose, on the purely pictorial features which catch and hold the eye. We know that the whirr of the mill-wheels along the river, the anchoring of the ships in the harbor, the movements of commerce and of travel, all have a connection with vast natural processes, that in turn the marks of human habitation and industry are often sources of the purest charm; yet it is possible to separate these elements of landscape, to look at a scene with the point of view, successively, of the geologist, the economist, and the artist. Just so, in reflecting upon literature, it is possible, and frequently desirable, to disengage and isolate such aspects of it as are represented by these terms "technique," "emotional content," "intellectual content."

Offhand, I suppose we should say that any piece of writing has intellectual content if there have gone into the making of it the

<sup>1</sup> A paper read at the College Conference on English in the Central Atlantic States, in Philadelphia, November 27, 1915. The general subject of discussion was "What Phases of English Literature Can and Shall Be Taught in College Courses?" This subject was subdivided as follows: (1) "The Literary Background of the Student"; (2) "Technique in Literature—Form and Structure"; (3) "Aesthetic Values in Literature—Emotional Content"; (4) "Ideas—The Intellectual Content of Literature."

characteristically intellectual processes of classification, induction and deduction, hypothesis and verification, analysis and synthesis. I would not, of course, reduce the entire operations of the mind to the level of merely syllogistic reasoning, nor fail to recognize the importance of that higher "sagacity" which, in the words of Sir Joshua Reynolds, "does not wait for the slow process of deduction, but goes at once, by what appears a kind of intuition, to the conclusion." Still, whether it be through dialectic or by a seeming intuition, I think we shall agree in calling "intellectual" only that in which there is felt a movement of the mind from the parts to the whole, or vice versa; an effort to comprehend some phenomenon by disclosing its structure or by relating it to a larger series in which it stands. And it will be generally admitted, unless one is willing hopelessly to confuse terms, that there are literary productions of high excellence in which this intellectual element, if not negligible, is plainly subordinate. Among poems, such are Byron's "Mazeppa," Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," Burns's "My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose," Heywoods' "Pack, Clouds, Away," and how many more exquisite lyrics? Among novels, such are *Captain Singleton* and *Treasure Island*; among dramas, *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Shoemakers' Holiday*. Is it uncommon, indeed, to meet a man who can tell a capital story (surely an estimable literary gift) and yet whose processes of thought are most elementary? If one sets over against the works I have mentioned as relatively lacking in intellectual content, such poems as Donne's sonnet "Death" or Tennyson's "Higher Pantheism," such dramas as *Hamlet* or *Ghosts*, such tales as *Candide* or *Rasselas*, such novels as *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel* or *Robert Elsmere*—whatever the value of the ideas contained—one will recognize in them the predominance of an intellectual intention, and will grasp with sufficient clearness the distinction I aim to draw.

But here I am confronted with a difficulty. If we mean by "intellectual content" merely that element which has resulted from the processes of the reasoning faculty, surely one of the most intellectual pieces of English literature is Poe's story "The Gold Bug." Here the interest is almost exclusively in the operations of

the mind; yet I think "The Gold Bug" scarcely answers to our notion of intellectual writing. Is it not because the reasoning employed leads to nothing outside the story itself, the goal of the intellectual effort being reached, as in an algebraic exercise, when the specific problem is solved?—because the mind is neither thrown back upon any enveloping conditions of life, of which this is a representative part, nor carried forward to any probable consequences? The performance seems to me comparable to some intricate physical exercise, demanding suppleness and control, but leading to no useful employment in the world of action. Surely an "intellectual content," in our meaning of the term, must be one which is not thus self-inclosed, which has relations with wider spheres of life, and which leads us on to thoughts beyond the accustomed reaches of our minds. But this idea of the intellectual life has been expressed with unapproachable precision and delicacy by Cardinal Newman. He says:

There is no enlargement unless there be a comparison of ideas one with another, as they come before the mind, and a systematizing of them. . . . And therefore a truly great intellect, and recognized to be such by the common opinion of mankind, . . . is one which takes a connected view of old and new, past and present, far and near, and which has an insight into the influence of all these one on another; without which there is no whole and no centre. It possesses the knowledge, not only of things, but also of their mutual and true relations; knowledge, not merely considered as acquirement, but as philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

This familiar passage may serve as a criterion of what we mean by "intellectual content."

If it is the emotional content which unites literature to the other arts, it is the intellectual content which supplies the bond between literature and philosophy. Incidentally, I may remark (though I have no doubt this has been pointed out before) that Newman has, in the chapter from which I have quoted, drawn with fineness that distinction which DeQuincey recognized, but bungled by his use of the unfortunate terms "literature of knowledge" and "literature of power."

There has of late been a distinct and, I think, altogether salutary reawakening among college teachers of English to the importance of this intellectual aspect of literature. More and more the

<sup>1</sup> *The Idea of a University*, Discourse VI, section 5.

tendency has been to lay stress in our courses upon those works which are primarily or in large degree the vehicles of ideas. Oddly enough, the most striking movement in this direction has concerned itself with the work in Freshman English. I refer, of course, to the many books of representative essays by various authors, dealing with some of the important results and guiding principles of human speculation and endeavor, the aim being to provide a basis for composition and to arouse in the undergraduate, at the outset of his college course, a genuine enthusiasm for the things of the mind. Usually some principle of orderly grouping, on the basis of similarity or contrast in the point of view, is observed. To his surprise, the Freshman is shot into an atmosphere of high intellectual pressure. Here is a "conflict of ideas" as vigorous and challenging as he encounters in his debating societies, but purged of the factitious quality, conducted in a humane spirit, and guided by higher motives than the winning of a "decision." Of the underlying theory, in so far as it concerns the pedagogy of composition, I do not speak, except to express my conviction of its essential soundness and to offer the personal testimony that my least disheartening experiences in the teaching of composition have resulted from following this method. The credit for the most conspicuous championing of this theory belongs, I think, to members of our association, Professors Steeves and Ristine,<sup>1</sup> who convinced many of us that we had underestimated the potential interests and the intellectual capacities of college Freshmen.

But of course our reawakened interest in "the cultivation of ideas" brought its own excesses. Possibly we came to overestimate the powers of the Freshman; perhaps the diet we offered him contained too many "irritant" ingredients. And it may be that, in the presence of the wide expanse of human knowledge which spread itself in these pages before our astonished eyes, we ourselves gained a new and becoming humility. The province which, under the authority of Bacon, we had taken for our own, proved inconveniently spacious and surprisingly well populated; and the thought of being trailed in our explorations of this delightful region by lynx-eyed colleagues

<sup>1</sup> See Professor Steeves's article, "Cultivation of Ideas in the College Writing Course," in the *Educational Review*, June, 1912, and *Representative Essays in Modern Thought*, edited by H. R. Steeves and F. H. Ristine (American Book Co.).

from other departments cast a shadow over the brightness of our days. At least, it was well that we should have been reminded by Professor Lane Cooper<sup>1</sup> that, after all, we probably could not speak with authority upon the subject of "geysers" or "the functioning of the digestive organs." I think I have observed in later collections of essays or "prose of ideas" a somewhat more conservative principle of selection. The reaction has led us to consider more closely the kind or order of ideas which constitute the intellectual content of literature.

But before I venture an answer, such as it is, to this weighty question, let me correct a possible misapprehension. I have seemed latterly to limit my discussion to the "prose of ideas"—prose of the type of Swift's and Burke's and Newman's and Arnold's. While that is undoubtedly the most convenient example of a kind of literature marked by intellectual power, I would not be understood to imply that an equal intellectual power may not find utterance in the poetic manner. (*Hamlet* is an example.) Following Aristotle, we have learned to regard as the test of greatness, not only in tragedy, but in comedy or fiction or even satire as well, its "universalizing" power. And what is this universalizing power but an instance (to describe it by its effect) of that enlargement or enlightenment of the mind of which Cardinal Newman spoke?

To revert to the previous question: Of what kind or order are the ideas which we find in literature? Frankly, I think that this question is one of extraordinary complexity, and I offer the following observations with the greatest diffidence. It seems to me that this philosophical illumination may result from the realization of ideas which are altogether foreign to literature. Take, for instance, the idea of time. Poincaré, in his fascinating book *La Valeur de la Science*, discriminates two varieties or conceptions of time: one, mathematical time, which is objective, susceptible of measurement, independent of consciousness; and one, psychological time, which is subjective, conditioned by memory, constituting an element of consciousness. His chapter on the measurement of time, which deals with the problems of transforming psychological into mathematical time and of finding a common measure for time-flows experienced by mutually impenetrable minds, affords me, for one,

<sup>1</sup> See the introduction to his *Theories of Style*.

just that sense of intellectual expansion which Newman has described so precisely. Yet, notwithstanding the clarity of the exposition, I should never think of these pages as possessing *literary* power, in the sense in which passages of Sainte-Beuve or Renan possess it, nor should I be willing to admit that the substance of the chapter belongs to literature at all. I question, in fact, whether this conception of mathematical time would, in any handling, be suitable for literary purposes; I think that the conception itself lies outside the pale of literature. Observe how a great poet, meditating upon the idea of time, keeps closely to what Poincaré would call its psychological aspect.

Fly, Envious Time, till thou run out thy race:  
Call on the lazy leaden-stepping Hours,  
Whose speed is but the heavy plummet's pace;  
And glut thyself with what thy womb devours,  
Which is no more than what is false and vain,  
And merely mortal dross;  
So little is our loss,  
So little is thy gain!  
For, when as each thing bad thou hast entombed,  
And, last of all, thy greedy self consumed,  
Then long Eternity shall greet our bliss  
With an individual kiss,  
And Joy shall overtake us as a flood;  
When every thing that is sincerely good  
And perfectly divine,  
With Truth, and Peace, and Love, shall ever shine  
About the supreme throne  
Of Him, to whose happy-making sight alone  
When once our heavenly-guided soul shall climb,  
Then, all this earthly grossness quit,  
Attired with stars we shall for ever sit,  
Triumphing over Death, and Chance, and thee, O Time!

The conclusion I would suggest is that where the mental illumination is accompanied by the effect of specifically literary power, the intellectual content has some obvious connection with actualities of human experience. Bacon, it will be remembered, found that, of all his works, his essays had been most current "for that, as it seems, they come home to men's business and bosoms." Thus we are enabled to recognize a philosophical knowledge, in the broad sense of Newman's definition, embracing all knowledge, in whatever field, that yields mental illumination; but we are saved from the

error (which, I cannot help thinking, taints the criticism of Matthew Arnold) of usurping for literature all the good things of the intellectual life. The intellectual content of literature, then, consists of ideas which not only enlarge the mental vision but also have to do, not too remotely, with the conditions of human life—if I may employ a word dulled by usage but still indispensable, with the spiritual side of human life. In other words, there is, in my view, an intellectual content, a kind of thought, which belongs specifically to literature. Though this content, being so majestic, may not be susceptible of precise definition, it has its center in the inner nature and destiny of man—"the doubtful doom of human kind."

Perhaps I have made the matter needlessly abstruse, but I think it has a very practical bearing. Is not our selection of texts to be studied determined by some such conviction or intuition of the demands of the human spirit? It is to be observed that Huxley's essays "On a Liberal Education" or "Science and Culture" appear more frequently in English texts than his, to me, equally stimulating essay "On a Piece of Chalk." It is true, one may advocate substituting for Freshman English, or any other unit, a course in something else—elementary science or philosophy or (save the mark!) "college life." But it would seem reasonable to engage other persons than professional *littérateurs* to teach such courses. Some of us are convinced that sufficient stimulus to sound thinking for all kinds of students is to be found in what is indubitably literature.

What are the special values of this intellectual part of literature for the undergraduate? We may distinguish three such values for three different types of students. A course in Bacon and Burke and Newman and Thoreau—or, with the proper emphasis, in Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Shelley—is the best possible antidote for the vulgar notion that literature is merely an elegant pastime for men and women of leisure (especially women)—a diversion which serious-minded young men, with work before them, can very well forego. We must enforce the elementary truth that if students wish to know anything about human life, beyond what their own narrow experience gives them, they must read books. Is it not preposterous that such an axiomatic precept should be needed in what we euphemistically call our "institutions of learning"?



The misconception just described may be called the Philistine fallacy about literature. It probably represents the attitude of the majority of our scientific and technical students. There is a second mistaken attitude, less prevalent, but more insidious—the attitude of the dilettante. His interest in certain phases of literature is genuine; but it is a purely emotional interest, seeking only an indulgence of the sensibilities, lacking contact with the healthy activities of market, church, and street. The dilettante is a sentimentalist, but there may be some tougher fiber in him, as yet undeveloped. The problem is to save him from the disaster, the bitter disillusion, which his weak emotionalism invites. Said a writer in the *Nation* some years ago:

We all lament the venal and weak-kneed journalism for which we are so celebrated. Do our English teachers make any concerted attempt to catch the embryo journalist, and stiffen his knees, and supply him with ideas too costly for even the multimillionaire proprietor to purchase? Some of us are sorry that our literary critics have no standards; that our versifiers are so vapid, so destitute both of thought and of feeling; that our novelists are so sensational and so fond of launching theories that were exploded a hundred years ago. Do our English teachers make any concerted attempt to impregnate contemporary literature with the ideas of which they are, or ought to be, the custodians?<sup>1</sup>

Recently I heard a description of a "study" occupied by two young aesthetes at one of our eastern colleges. A marble bust of Apollo stood on the mantle; etchings by Aubrey Beardsley hung on the wall; and an edition de luxe of the writings of Oscar Wilde adorned the expensive bookcase. I know that these surroundings are very far from representative of the life of our literary youths, but think of their existing anywhere in the year of the world-war!

Thirdly, for the rather uncommon young person whose mind is of an excessively metaphysical type, no experience could be more wholesome than a course in literature heavily weighted with thought. I do not know how else he could learn that to think soundly about human life, it is necessary to think in the terms of human experience. I do not know where else he could get that experience of life which alone will give his thought vitality and save him from the pitfalls of purely a priori speculation.

<sup>1</sup> Stuart P. Sherman, in the *Nation*, May 14, 1908.

But aside from these particular benefits accruing to certain types of students, there is a general contribution of the study of literature to the intellectual life of all. Most college teachers, I think, recognize that the primary needs of the average undergraduate are a first-hand acquaintance with a fair amount of really great, enduring literature, and secondly, proceeding from, and formed by, such orientation in "the best that has been thought and known in the world," a sense of values, of standards, by which sophistry may be discriminated from argument, mere rhetoric from eloquence, pseudo-mystical enthusiasm from insight, prettiness from poetry. I realize, of course, that any sound presentation of literature will not disregard the historical aspects of literary development, and that questions of historic origin, of influence, of the growth and modification of *genres*, may be handled in the classroom with fruitful results. If they open the student's eyes to the phenomenon of continuity in the history of ideas, if they make him perceive the relative element which enters into all our judgments, if they quicken his sense of perfect form, such discussions are useful, indeed indispensable. But there is a danger that these methods, if pressed too far, may leave the student with the impression that the validity of any idea is, for the enlightened *littérateur*, a matter of slight consequence. They may make it difficult for him to approach a work in the frame of mind in which the author desired it should be read. Wordsworth's view of nature was simply the sentimentalism of the eighteenth century, mixed with Platonic ideas of pre-existence: we will remember that formula, and we won't bother to inquire how general is the Wordsworthian attitude, how far it is sanctioned by experience, or to what ideals of conduct it would lead. Everything grew out of something else, and in turn gives birth to new "tendencies." It is a merry procession, and, though we don't quite know what it is all for, we follow it blithely. This, of course, is only an abuse of the historical method. We shall not allow it to obscure for us the importance of that insistent question which youth puts, so crudely sometimes, but so earnestly—"Is it true?" Nor shall we forget that, as William James said in one of his latest essays, the end of all education is the cultivation of a sense of values, the ability to distinguish work well done from work ill done, the genuine from the meretricious.